

Socrates

By Vickie Chao

Ancient Greece had many famous philosophers. Among them, Socrates is perhaps the most famous, but the least understood. The reason for that is because Socrates never wrote anything down. After he died in 399 B.C., many of his supporters (such as Plato, Aristotle, and Xenophon) tried to preserve his memory, so they wrote books about him. In their work, they liked to portray him doing what he was known best for -- making conversation. They published his dialogues and kept his ideas floating. But since those sources were not first-hand and were often conflicting, it is impossible to tell if they truly reflected Socrates' views.

Socrates was born in Athens on June 4, 470 B.C. At the time of his birth, his home country, the Athenian Empire, was at the peak of its power. But that was about to change. In 431 B.C., Sparta invaded Athens and held the city under siege. The two sides were at a standoff for nearly thirty years. By the time the so-called Peloponnesian War was finally over in 404 B.C., Athens had lost most of its population, its prized navy, and much of its wealth. The defeat destroyed Athens completely. Never again could it rise up and reclaim its glory!



As a person who had seen both the good and the bad days of Athens, Socrates told his fellow citizens to think and question everything around them. For example, he would ask what the true meaning of justice was. He would wonder what the true meaning of wisdom was. Often times, he would throw out a question and let people answer it. When they responded, he would then ask more questions and press them to think deeper. As the dialogue continued, those who called themselves knowledgeable would suddenly find themselves not as wise. The discovery made many second-guess their beliefs. It also made many uncomfortable and even angry.

To the Athenians, Socrates was a controversial figure. On one extreme, there was Plato who openly praised the man. On the other extreme, there was Aristophanes who clearly disliked him. In 423 B.C., Aristophanes wrote a play called *The Clouds*. In it, he mocked Socrates and labeled him as a Sophist. (A Sophist in the fifth century B.C. meant a person who taught others, in exchange for fees, how to speak and what arguments to make during public debates. The notion carried a negative undertone.)

The plot of *The Clouds* began with Strepsiades lamenting about his son's gambling addiction and growing debts. Strepsiades loved his son, Pheidippides, dearly. He hated to see him spending all his time betting on horse races. He tried to reason with him several times. But nothing he said made any difference. One day, after another sleepless night, Strepsiades came to Socrates' school, the Phrontisterion or "Thinkery." He wanted to learn how he could talk his way out of paying debts. Socrates took the old man in and gave him some brief lessons. Impressed by what he had heard so far, Strepsiades told Pheidippides to study at the school with him. Both the father and the son were very good students. But how they applied their knowledge later on turned out to be completely different. In Strepsiades' case, he used smart arguments to fend off the creditors and avoid paying them altogether. In Pheidippides' case, he beat up his father and calmly explained why this horrific act of his was morally acceptable. At last, Strepsiades came to see what nonsense the Thinkery was teaching and burned the school down.

Aristophanes' *The Cloud* was funny and cleverly written. While the entire story was made-up, many who had seen the show simply walked away with the distorted image of Socrates. They believed that Socrates was indeed what Aristophanes had painted in the play. They believed that he was a Sophist. They believed that he was a bad influence on the younger generations.

In 399 B.C., the authorities of Athens accused Socrates of impiety and corrupting the youth. They brought him to trial. At court, Socrates defended himself forcefully. He denied that he was a Sophist. He rejected the idea that he corrupted the youth. He said that a lot of people disliked him simply because he had pointed out their ignorance. Socrates always maintained that he was an ignorant man. The fact that he knew of his own ignorance actually made him wiser than those who refused to admit it. As passionate as this speech was, Socrates could not

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sway the jury. They found him guilty and sentenced him to death. The verdict did not shock Socrates. He took the bad news calmly. On May 7, 399 B.C., he swallowed some poison and died.

Socrates

Questions

- _____ 1. Where was Socrates from?
 - A. Macedon
 - B. Athens
 - C. Thebes
 - D. Sparta

- _____ 2. Which of the following about Socrates is true?
 - A. Socrates was born after the Peloponnesian War.
 - B. Socrates loved to ask questions.
 - C. Socrates died of a natural cause.
 - D. Socrates claimed himself the smartest person in Greece.

- _____ 3. For how many years did the Peloponnesian War last, and who won?
 - A. 43 years, Sparta
 - B. 27 years, Sparta
 - C. 15 years, Athens
 - D. 35 years, Athens

- _____ 4. Which of the following of Aristophanes' plays made fun of Socrates?
 - A. The Clouds
 - B. The Knights
 - C. The Birds
 - D. The Wasps

- _____ 5. What was the name of Socrates' school in Aristophanes' play debuted in 423 B.C.?
 - A. The University
 - B. The Academy
 - C. The Thinkery
 - D. The Library

- _____ 6. What was the accusation against Socrates?
 - A. Burning down a school
 - B. Corrupting the youth
 - C. Beating his own father
 - D. Evading gambling debts

- _____ 7. Which of the following is NOT a supporter of Socrates?
 - A. Aristophanes
 - B. Xenophon
 - C. Plato
 - D. Aristotle

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_____ 8. Which of the following about Socrates is true?

- A. Socrates admitted that he was a Sophist.
- B. Socrates was set free after the trial in 399 B.C.
- C. Socrates penned all his work in the name of Plato.
- D. Socrates encouraged his fellow citizens to question everything around them.

In your opinion, why did Socrates never write down his thoughts?

Suppose you were a student of Socrates. You just went to see Aristophanes' play mocking your own teacher. You wanted to write an article defending Socrates. What would you say?
